

[Conyers Elliott Frasier]

[No.2?] SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT LIFE HISTORY [21A?]

TITLE: CONYERS ELLIOTT FRASIER

Date of First Writing December 6, 1938

Name of Person Interviewed Conyers Elliott Frasier (Negro)

Street Address Rt. 4, Arthurtown

Place Columbia, S.C.

Occupation Teacher, Preacher, Farmer

Name of Writer L. E. Cogburn

Name of Reviser State Office

Frasier is a rather diminutive Negro, little over five feet tall, and of unmixed African blood. He was splitting wood this morning and I hoped he wasn't too busy to give me the story of his life.

He shook his head. "Certainly not, sir. Let's go into the house where it's warmer. If you can get a story from my life you're welcome to it."

Frasier's place is by far the best in this dingy little settlement of Arthurtown, four miles from Columbia. The house, a one-story, long rectangular frame structure, with a narrow porch across the front, stands about twenty feet from the road and extends lengthwise to the

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rear. The space behind is used for a chicken yard, wood pile, and for parking a wagon, a truck, old plows, and harrows. At the left are stock lot and stables. [C. 10 S., C. Box 2.?]

"You have a roomy place here."

"Yes, about a half acre. It's messy looking, but you can't farm and 2 run a wood business without a litter. I'm going to paint the house inside and outside this spring or summer."

We entered the house from the small rear porch, and Frasier showed me through the rooms. At the left and of the porch is the bathroom. First on the right of the six foot hallway that extends through the house, is the kitchen. It is lighted by two windows, and the floor is covered with linoleum. Between the windows is a new-looking wood range and near it a new style kitchen cabinet. Another cabinet in the corner serves as a cupboard; a cook table stands near the stove.

The dining room, adjoining the kitchen, has but one window, and is furnished neatly with a table, buffet, and chairs. The living room, about thirteen by fifteen feet, as are the other rooms, is lighted by two windows and warmed by a heater. The floor is covered with linoleum. A center table, settee, large rocker and straight chairs, and a new radio, showed tasteful feminine arrangement and care. Conspicuous on the wall was a full length portrait of a tall young mulatto in a United States Army uniform. "My wife's first husband," Frasier told me.

The bedroom of Frasier and his wife, across the hall, has two windows and an open fireplace. The furniture - bed, wardrobe, dresser, washstand, and three chairs, looked comparatively new, and the bed was neatly spread. The children's bedroom adjoins theirs.

The sight of two long rolls of linoleum standing in the hall called forth Frasier's measured comment: "Something new for Christmas. You must have observed that some of the floors, especially the bedroom, need new covering. The walls need new paper and [apint?]. We do such things as we can."

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Next to the children's room, Frasier's father-in-law has his combined bedroom and living room. Everything was in aged masculine disorder. The furniture - bed, dresser, washstand, rocker and straight chair, ancient but 3 good - were placed and tumbled according to his convenience. A tall, wiry-looking, dusky mulatto was hovering over the oil heater heater when we entered - the old man who had built this home and had given it to Frasier's wife, was stricken with blindness some fifteen years ago.

In the crowded little room, Frasier began his story, speaking slowly and meticulously:

"My full name is Conyers Elliott Frasier. Forty-seven years age I was born on a little farm of twenty-five acres, owned by my father, in Clarendon County. There were ten children, making twelve to sit at the table at meal times. By my father's management and with the help of all large enough to work, we had enough food and clothes to make us comfortable.

"My father died when I was in the fifth grade and my mother had a hard time bringing up her family, for she had to struggle against ill health while she kept the wolf from the door.

"Then, too, after the crops were gathered she kept me in school four months in the year. The first great event in my life was when I made a speech at the school closing. The principal of the colored school at Manning heard me make that speech. And when the exercises had come to a close, he told my mother he liked my speech.

"Having found the way to mother's heart by this appraisal of her son, he asked her to let him take me with him to his school. She hesitated. He told her that it would cost her nothing, for he could give me work around his home and school, feeding cows and milking them, cutting wood and bringing it in.

"She finally gave her consent, and I lived in Professor Baumgardner's home for four years, till I finished the tenth grade. The summer afterwards, I stood the teacher's examination and the school board awarded me a teacher's certificate. This started me on my career as

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a teacher, right at my old home. I taught here for two years, three months in the year at twenty dollars a month, and saved fifty dollars. A mint of money for me in those days.

“But I never lost my interest in farming. Each vacation I would work on the farm with my brother, helping make my own living expenses.

“A while after I left school, Professor Baumgardner began teaching at Allen University in Columbia. I felt the need of a college education. Once more the professor came to my aid. I went to Allen and again lived in the home of my old friend while I was taking the Normal Course. In addition to the fifty dollars that I had saved from teaching, I went through with the help of what I was able to earn as butler and general servant boy.

“With this training I now felt that I should do a better job as teacher, and I wanted to teach the school I had taught before, near my home. I was disappointed. Some of the people had become jealous of me. Ten miles away, down at Sandy Bottom, I taught for two years. I was paid twenty-five dollars a month, four months in the year, but had to board myself out of that.

“When I went home for vacation, my mother had to be carried to the hospital. This cost me fifty dollars to get her in and, later, thirty more. I was glad that I had the money to help her, but it took more than half of my savings. I struggled on anyhow.

“It was at this time I was called to the ministry. Preparation for this would mean three years more at college. Some told me I would never make it.

“Back to Allen I went, and once more Professor Baumgardner took me into his home to live. They found a church of eight members for me, six miles out in the country. Every Friday afternoon I would walk out there 5 and stay until Sunday, visiting and working among my members and preaching at the regular services on Sunday. They gave me one and two dollars a week. But it wasn't long before the church began to grow. We remodeled the building and soon the membership increased to forty. [Then them?] began to pay me

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three and four dollars a week. This, with the three dollars a week earned by carrying 'The State' a newspaper, I paid my expenses and finished this course.

"I liked the college so well I went back and took the four year's college course. Now I roomed on the campus, paying all my expenses except tuition, which was given by the college. I continued the work with my church, and continued carrying papers to help myself along. One summer I worked as helper to carpenters in building Camp Jackson. This paid me well, and I saved a nice sum to help with next year's expenses. My church was now paying four and five dollars a week.

"After I received my A. B. degree, the people at Jenkinsville heard about me and came down and employed me as principal of their graded school. [We?] had a modern school building, fully equipped with desks, blackboards, charts, and so forth. This being a much school than I had taught in before, having four assistant teachers, I was a little dubious; but the children all loved me and I had no trouble with the management, I taught here three years, eight months in the year, at sixty-five dollars a month. At this same time I was pastor of two churches, which paid me thirty dollars a month.

"The next conference assigned me to the Chapin Circuit, including the church at Chapin and at Little Mountain. They found out that I was a teacher and employed me to teach the Little Mountain school. My work continued here 6 in this way four years, the maximum time allowed a preacher on a charge.

"Then I was sent to Arthurtown Circuit, a distance of only about twenty-five miles. I began to study about being nearly forty years old, and living alone in bachelor quarters the rest of my life made me think seriously. You know, when you come to face old age without a companion or anybody to share your troubles with you, things don't look so bright.

"There was a young widow living near the parsonage and she, too, was lonesome. She had two children and they began to sit on my lap and then to love me like their own daddy. That made Roxanna kind to me. And before long I told her I thought we could make each

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other happier, and she thought so too. One thing I liked about her, she was interested in home life, and didn't want an automobile to run around in all the time, enjoying the frivolous things of life. She was a graduate of Benedict College and had a good job as principal of the school. If we could combine our salaries, I thought it would be that much better for us both. So the fall after I moved here, Roxanna and I had the knot tied, and I moved to her home, bringing my suitcase and trunk.

"After marrying a member of my church, there was some jealousy shown by some of the women of the congregation. So much so that I thought it best to ask the Conference to send me to another work. Knowing that I have a home here, the Conference has been good to me in giving me work not more than thirty-five or forty miles away. The next move was to a Circuit in Newberry County. I needed a conveyance to go and come, so I bought a little automobile.

"At present I have two churches, in Willowgrove Circuit, Sumter County, about thirty-five miles from here. I don't have an automobile now and have to use the bus or train.

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"But how did you ever give up teaching?"

"When I came to this charge in 1930, my health was at a low ebb. I had been doing the work of two men. Either is a man's job, preaching or teaching. Thinking that working out in the open would benefit my health, I bought twelve acres of land near here and worked a little farm in addition to my church work.

"For several years now I have been renting around twenty acres, besides working the twelve that I own. I have two very good plug mules, and an ox to help out with the plowing when needed. I do a great deal of the work myself, but I hire two hands at a dollar a day to do the most of it. This year I planted fifteen acres of cotton and fifteen in corn, and made

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five bales of cotton and two hundred bushels of corn. Dropped on cotton on account of the boll weevil.

“The Bible says, 'There is a time to sow and a time to harvest;' therefore, I plant all during the year. The year round I have a vegetable garden. I broadcast peas in the corn as I lay it by, and sow peas after the oats.

Frasier had been talking along with little hesitancy, but now he seemed to be a little restless. Thinking the interview had better be closed, I asked, “How do you like your work?”

“I was called to preach, but I like to farm on account of my health. I was born and raised in the country and prefer it. My motto is 'to build up broken down churches and to work for the salvation of souls.' I put in practice what I preach. I value my morals. My moral character, I value that. A man can be a good moralist and not be religious, but he will have to be a good moralist before he can be religious.

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“I like amusements; any fair and decent game, such as baseball, football, and horse-racing, when there is no betting. I don't believe in card playing and dancing, and that kind of stuff.

“‘Lay by’ season is when we farmers have the best time. That comes around the Fourth of July, for a few weeks when the work slacks up after we have quit working the crops. We go a-fishing, have picnics, attend 'big meetings,' (meaning revival services at the church at least once a day for a week or more), and walk over the farm and eat watermelons and peaches.

“A place on the river is usually picked as the best place for a picnic. The night before, some of the men who were good at catching fish would go ahead and catch the fish and have them ready for the picnic the next day. Every family carries a basket of dinner, fried chicken, cakes, pies, and other things; and when the fish are fried, we all put our dinner

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on tablecloths spread on the ground and eat together. This is a happy time for all. The young folks play games; some stroll down 'lovers' lane,' making plans for the future; the older ones sit around and enjoy being with old friends, laughing and talking of the amusing incidents in their lives when they were young. There should be play time as well as work time. Then I believe we would be healthier and enjoy life more.

"Since I have been working on the farm my health has improved. I've spent very little for medicine and doctor's bills. I get wholesome and fresh food, such as vegetables, sweet milk and pure water, sunshine and fresh air, and plenty of exercise. My motto is, 'Early to bed and early to rise.' I like to be on the farm on time. When the sun rises, I rise with it, and sometimes before.

"Every summer at Benedict and at Allen, we have a lecture on health protection, 'specially on tuberculosis or consumption. This disease is 9 more common among the colored race. [We?] can stand the heat but not the cold,—the white man's blood is thicker. Our ancestors came from the hot climate of Africa, and, therefore, as a race, we can't stand the cold.

"I don't deal in politics, but vote regularly. Some people will come to you and try to get you to vote their way, but I vote for who I want to."

Coming out of the warm room into the cold air, our attention was attracted by a commotion and the squealing and grunting of hogs out by the lot. Frasier said, "You hear those hogs? They are fixing their beds for cold weather. Watch out for cold weather when you see that. Would you like to see them?"

"Yes, I would," I replied.

Laurien, the little daughter of about twelve, trailed behind us as we walked to the pig pen.

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"If the weather gets much colder it will be a fine time to kill one for Christmas. Which one are you going to kill? That big fat one?"

Immediately Laurien answered, "No, Sar, that's my pet. You ain't goin' to kill my hog."